

Norman Aylmer's first letter to his sister Ida
9 September 1940

Dear Ida,

Thanks for the note which Mum brought back with her. When I was reading the bit "I hope that it is quieter for you now", we were going through the worst air raid in history ... as you said it is like reading a thriller not knowing what is on the next page. I will try to describe what is happening starting from last Saturday and finishing I don't know when. Here goes.

Saturday 7th Sept 1940: Quiet morning after the now usual night of a few planes droning too and for with the occasional bomb in the distance and bursts of gunfire. The bombs make an awful scream which can be heard for miles. For the most part however they are dropping great flares which light up the entire sky.

Saturday afternoon one or two of our planes go over but there is a strange stillness everywhere like a calm before a storm. At about a quarter to five there was a roar of planes going overhead towards the coast. They were our fighters. I guessed what that meant and soon after there was a tremendous roar of planes. I rushed out to get Mum as the sirens were going, she was walking the dog. Having got her in, I went into the garden with Dad's field glasses and saw over the [Whipps Cross] hospital a black cloud of planes, we heard later that there were over 150 in this bunch. The ground was shaking with a great barrage of gunfire and the shells were bursting just ahead of this cloud. I remember holding a tea cloth up over my head, as though that would have been of much use. Mum and Dad stayed in the house which was the best place. The planes were very high so appeared to be going very slowly, the guns were going frantic and the shell bursts were like balls of cotton wool all around them. With the field glasses the cloud separated into hundreds of small dots, big dots going steadily from the hospital chimney towards Canterbury School, whilst all around them, dozens more smaller dots which was their fighter escort, twisted and turned all over the place. When they were over the school, the guns went wild, we learnt afterwards they couldn't quite get the height but even so it was too much for the planes and they all turned back but only for a while. Suddenly the guns stopped and down from above came about a dozen of our fighters. They split the bombers up into small groups which again turned back towards London. As a group got clear of our fighters so the guns opened up on them.

Back over the main group a series of dog fights was taking place and I watched as a plane came spiralling down to crash somewhere behind the hospital. Soon a white dot appeared getting larger slowly and I picked out a man on a parachute. He landed safely in Wanstead and was one of ours.

This same thing was happening in many other parts of the East and South of London and there were something like 1000 planes involved. Hundreds got through to the city and for two hours the noise was continuous and every few minutes another lot would go through, this time unhindered. As the bombers got over beyond our church I could here a continuous scream of bombs and pretty soon dense clouds of smoke were rolling up beyond the Junior school and down to the end of our road. If you can imagine what I mean, the sky became solid black over the entire length of the horizon from due West of us to the North West. That raid was over soon after seven by which time half of the sky was a wall of black. As it got dark, the black began to go pink and gradually the entire sky to the West and North turned blood red. It was an amazing sight and like an incredible sunset but it was flickering with huge flares going

up and every so often an enormous explosion either a time bomb or they were dynamiting an unsafe building. It was unforgettable!

Unfortunately we were treated to the same performance the following night, Sunday, and again on Monday. But let me go back to Saturday. Marg Brown and I were worried about her friend, Marjorie Mumford and her mother who lived in Forest Gate near to the Thatched House. As there were no trams or trolley busses running, we walked to Leytonstone High Street and then down to Forest Gate. We passed Borthwick Road where our Gran used to live but it was all roped off and smoky and there were fire engines down there.

!!! had to stop writing then and Mum and I dived to the floor as a bomb whistled down close by.

To continue. We reached Mumford's just after eight and got the news that all of the London docks were ablaze from Tower Bridge, down to Tilbury. Bethnal Green Bow Poplar and much of the East End of London had been badly damaged. Mrs Mumford had a bad leg and could not stand. She was just telling us how she had to be carried down to a shelter in the afternoon, by an A.R.P. [air raid patrol] warden, when off went the sirens and being the only "man" available I had to pick her up and do the same. Luckily she is quite light! We saw them safely settled and as the fun hadn't started, we set off to walk home. The sky was blood red from the fires, and although there was no traffic going our way, the road was packed with fire engines ambulances etc, all pouring into London from towns further North. By the time we reached Harrow Green [on Leytonstone High Road], the searchlights were up in a great white wall. That and the light of the fires made it seem as bright as day.

By the time that we got to the Midland railway arch, the guns were thundering and heavy formations of planes were heading into London. We had to dodge in and out of doorways and dash across roads every time a mass of shrapnel came down. We got through Fairlop and then Hainault Roads and then the air shattered as the bombers unloaded onto the fires. We had just left Hainault Road when a plane came right overhead dropping red and green flares. We thought it must be one of ours until we heard the scream of a bomb and we flattened ourselves against a wall as it landed in Hainault [Road] where we had just come from. We ran on down to the Browns' house and dived under the stairs with the rest of them. They wanted me to stay the night but I thought that I should get back to Mum and Dad. I knew that Em and Sis were at our house so I didn't hurry and as it quietened down a little by 10.30, I left the Browns with them all standing at the door shouting "RUN".

Had to dive on the ground once in our road as an Ack Ack [anti-aircraft] shell came down and burst just overhead. I had just reached our door when a fresh racket started up. I found them all making up a bed under the table so gave a hand. Now and again Em or I would shout "down", and we would all hit the floor. Em and Sis had to stay the night but I chanced it and went up to bed. Every now and then I had to rush down as bombs fell nearby. Whenever the planes were driven back from London, by the guns, they would unload somewhere near to us. I did not think to see the [Whipps Cross] hospital standing in the morning but they only had some in the grounds luckily.

Despite all this, there is not too much damage around here, just a few houses and shops have gone here and there. Nobody got any sleep however and lots of people are without electricity and water. But we are alright. The all clear went at about 5.30. Marg and I went for a walk to Wanstead Park when the siren went again but we only heard our fighters going over towards the coast. This was the 45th raid alert since Mum and Dad came back from their visit to you. I

went back to the Browns' house just as Mr Brown came in from a tour of East London. (on his bike). He said that the fires down the Thames are mostly under control, but that the damage to Whitechapel, Poplar, Limehouse, Silvertown, Bow, Stepney, Bethnal Green, Stratford etc is enormous and that in some places whole areas have been flattened. Everyone slept all the afternoon except Dad and I as we had to put a wooden panel in the window space that the burglar had bashed in whilst they were away with you and I was working.

Things seemed quieter in the afternoon so Marg and I decided to have another walk and to get home before dark and a possible raid. We set off up James Lane and saw a mass of people going down into a shelter that has been dug just near your old school. They were carrying mattresses and all manner of things. We went across the forest and up to the water works towards Woodford. Suddenly the guns and sirens went off together and we had to rush under big trees to get out of the rain of shrapnel that began to fall. Shrapnel makes a hissing sound as it comes down and is very hot when it lands. Every so often we could see through gaps in the trees and there were many planes with shell bursts all around them. We dodged all the way back through the forest but it got dark and then the sky began to light up with many huge fires that were being started over towards London. We just got back to the Browns' house as many waves of planes began to pass overhead and the gunfire became frantic again. This happened again the next day with the raids beginning during daylight and going on into the night. It is quite spectacular, the moan, moan, moan, of their engines, the weaving searchlights, the flash and roar of guns, the scream and then the crash of bombs, and the huge flickering fires as a backdrop.

I reached home at about ten thirty when it was quiet and was talking to Mr Meadows at next doors gate, when a single plane came over quite low from Whipps Cross corner direction towards the High School. Then one after another, there were five big flashes, starting at the end of our road and lighting up at intervals right across in front of us. Then we got the explosions one after the other, all in a straight line. We had another bad night and the next morning everyone looked awful.

Going to work on my bike, I was with hundreds of people on bikes or walking to their work. Only a few busses were running and the trolleys were totally off. I had to make big diversions as many roads were roped off. Huge blocks of flats up Lea Bridge Road on the right were completely demolished and opposite the nice little swan pond at Downs road, that lovely block of flats and shops was just a heap of rubble. They had had a direct hit. I reached work by devious ways, couldn't get near Dalston, and although Essex Road was open, every road leading off to the left was shut off and there was a huge hole in the road at Islington. There had been a direct hit on the shelter opposite Sadlers Wells theatre, and many killed there. From there to Grays Inn road there was not much damage, but as I turned into Grays Inn there was not a single pane of glass intact in the whole road. I couldn't see any big damage but it was obvious that something big had happened, I rode on down to Holborn and was stopped by a copper who asked me where I was going. I told him that my work was in Fulwood Place opposite Chancery Lane, he said I couldn't go as it was too risky with many buildings unsafe. I looked left towards Kingsway and my goodness it was one great heap of masonry glass and all sorts of rubbish. Towards Chancery Lane was thick smoke and I could just make out shapes of firemen with hoses jetting water on smouldering ruins. There were gas mains blazing here and there, it was awful. I went over to another part of the road and was stopped by a warden who asked what the police had said to me. I said he told me to be careful, so the warden let me through. I carried my bike over piles of rubbish, and hose pipes like mad knitting until I reached Fulwood Place. There were about half a dozen of our chaps standing there who had done the same as me. As the smoke rolled back, we could see where Jolleys used to be, do you remember it, and that huge building called Lincoln House, there was just a

great smoking pit and where the road used to be were heaps of twisted girders the remains of busses and cars filling the road for hundreds of yards. The firemen had great problems trying to climb around this lot. The front of First Avenue House was in the road as was the next big building next to Ernie's old place and the building opposite. I can tell you that there was no building intact from Chancery Lane to the Holborn Empire and many not there at all. Just pits and smoking rubble, with gas mains flaring here and there. St Thomas's [hospital] had a direct hit as had the hospital at Stratford.

We all went down our court to our building and found that there wasn't a piece of glass left in the entire building. In fact many of the frames had been blown in and were wrapped around the machines. As we also had a glass roof the top of the five storey building was open to the sky. We all set to, picking glass and metal out of the machines and trying to cover windows and some chaps had a go at the roof with various pieces of wood and sheets but before long the police came along and told us to leave as several unexploded bombs had been found. With nothing to do I went home and slept in a chair in the garden as it was quite warm. At 5.15, the sirens went and I witnessed another sky battle just overhead. After the all clear, brother Ernie came round and I helped him carry two deck chairs back for them to use to sleep in their shelter. Everywhere people were queuing up to get down public shelters, carrying blankets books and food. At E's suggestion, I went home and started making a shelter in the garden for Mum and Dad. I made it up against the big concrete wall at the bottom of the garden and after the wooden construction I covered it over with earth. I don't know how good it will be but it may be better than having the house fall on you. I have seen many collapsed houses and many people have been buried alive in them. This will withstand shrapnel and there is no risk of fire.

I've just heard that the old people's home in Union Road has been hit by what they call an aerial torpedo, killing twelve old ladies and injuring many more. At about three p.m. this morning we had a very severe raid and fires raged over London again. I was surprised to see the hospital still with us in the morning although they had some bombs in the grounds. It was like going through a maze trying to get to work, it is very difficult to get in to London now. Mum has just heard from Mrs Draper, she is having a very hard time where she lives. Many of the bridges over the Thames have been weakened and are only open to light traffic. People are steaming out of London now, can't say that I blame them. Do you remember big ginger Tom who is engaged to Ellen Etteridge, he has a time bomb in his garden that they say is about 6ft long and 1 ft 6ins in diameter and is buried about thirty feet down. Lucky for them that it is a time bomb. They have been evacuated some where to the West, Tom has gone to live with the Etteridges.

Better stop now, this has taken up much spare time over the last few days, I hope that you find it interesting, perhaps you will keep it as it may be worth reading again sometime. There is a crater at the Thatched House [pub] now big enough to lose a trolley bus in! All the shops opposite the co-op have gone. Lord Haw Haw [British traitor] said on German radio "don't bother to dig up all your old tramlines, well dig them up for you."

It may not be as bad as it sounds as there is a lot of London left. Am sending some money for your birthday, it's in Mum's parcel. Here's wishing you a Happy Birthday.

All the best,
Norm.